



## ISSUE BRIEF

---

# PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE AND THE POLICING VIEWS OF DETROIT RESIDENTS (2020)

FEBRUARY 2024  
BY LAUREN CHOJNACKI

## INTRODUCTION

The 2020 murder of private citizen George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis led to widespread social unrest around the United States. Activists in most major cities, including [Detroit, called for police reform](#) and for their cities to “defund the police.” Despite the calls for police reform, a 2021 report from the University of Michigan’s Detroit Metro Area Communities Study (DMACS) found that most Detroit residents still expressed [favorable views towards the police](#). This simultaneous desire for police reform and favorable public opinion regarding police demonstrates a tension among residents who want both change in a system and the security and protection experienced within that system.

One possible explanation for the apparent tension between residents wanting both police reform and police protection may be that different people have very different interactions with police in their daily lives. Individuals who have only had interactions where they personally benefit from police protection may have more favorable views than those who have negative contact with police, such as being subjected to force or profiling. This report uses the DMACS data, collected between July 15-29 2020, to examine how Detroiters’ interactions with the police shape their views towards policing. The report considers three types of self-reported interactions residents may have had with police: forceful contact, non-forceful contact, and no contact in the last year.

This report shows that personal experiences with the police matter for how residents view the police. Individuals who have either personally experienced forceful contact or have friends or family who have experienced forceful contact are consistently more critical of the police than those who have no contact with the police, even when taking demographic factors into account. The results concerning non-forceful contact are less conclusive, with Detroit residents who have not had forceful contact with police sometimes holding similar views of police as people who have experienced forceful police contact.

This report also shows that a resident’s age affects views towards police. Young Detroiters (Detroiters who are between the ages of 18-30) across all types of police contact tend to be more critical towards police than older Detroiters in all categories. Young residents who report experience with forceful contact typically express the most negative views towards police. All results have been weighted to reflect the population of the City of Detroit.



## KEY FINDINGS

- Detroit residents who have any type of contact with police (forceful contact and non-forceful contact) are more critical of the police in comparison to those who have no contact with the police.
- Residents with forceful contact tend to be even more critical than those with non-forceful contact, though sometimes those with non-forceful contact provide similar responses to those with forceful contact. The similarities between forceful and non-forceful contact implies that any type of contact may sometimes be enough to change views.
- The age of Detroit residents is an important factor in determining views towards police, especially among those who have experienced forceful contact. Young Detroiters tend to hold more negative views towards the police than older Detroiters, and young Detroiters with forceful contact are the most critical of police.

## ABOUT ONE-THIRD OF DETROITERS HAD CONTACT OR KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAD CONTACT WITH POLICE IN 2020.

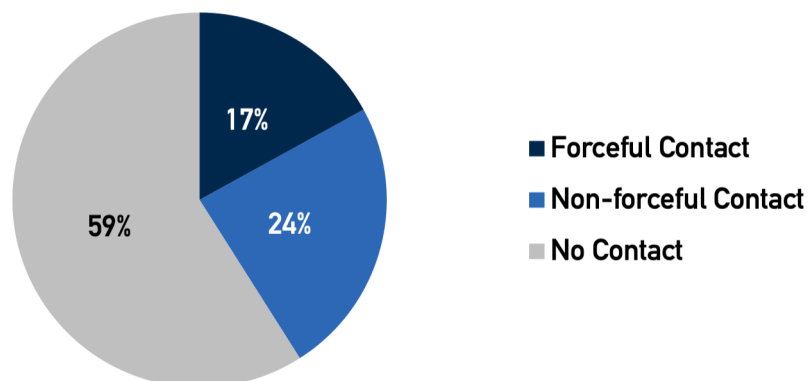
- In 2020, a majority of Detroit residents reported not having contact with police in the most recent year.<sup>1</sup>
  - About one-third (37%) of residents had either personal contact with police or contact through a family member or acquaintance (from here on referred to as “proximate contact”).
  - Fifteen percent of residents had direct police contact.
  - Eleven percent of residents had family members who had contact with the police and 21% had an acquaintance who had contact with the police.

## MOST DETROITERS REPORT NOT EXPERIENCING FORCEFUL CONTACT WITH POLICE.

For this report, we distinguish between the **type** of police contact residents reported in the past year.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we are interested in those who have had exposure either personally or proximally through family members/friends to forceful contact from the police.<sup>3</sup>

- Two percent of Detroit residents reported personal experience with forceful police contact in the last year.<sup>4</sup>
    - Given [Detroit’s total adult population estimate in 2020](#), this translates to about 8,755 adult residents experiencing forceful contact for the year.<sup>5</sup>
  - When broadening the analysis out to include the experiences of family members and acquaintances, 17% of Detroiters had personal experience or proximate exposure to forceful contact by police.
    - The lack of significant differences may be due to the self reported nature of the survey, where different demographic groups have different baselines for what is considered forceful contact by the police.
  - There are no significant racial differences among residents who experience personal or proximate forceful contact from the police.
  - There are no differences in experience of forceful police contact among Detroiters of different income levels, education levels, and age cohorts. The only significant variation observed by demographic group is by gender, where women are less likely to report exposure to forceful police contact in comparison to men (15% vs 21%).
- know someone who experienced forceful contact at the hands of police.

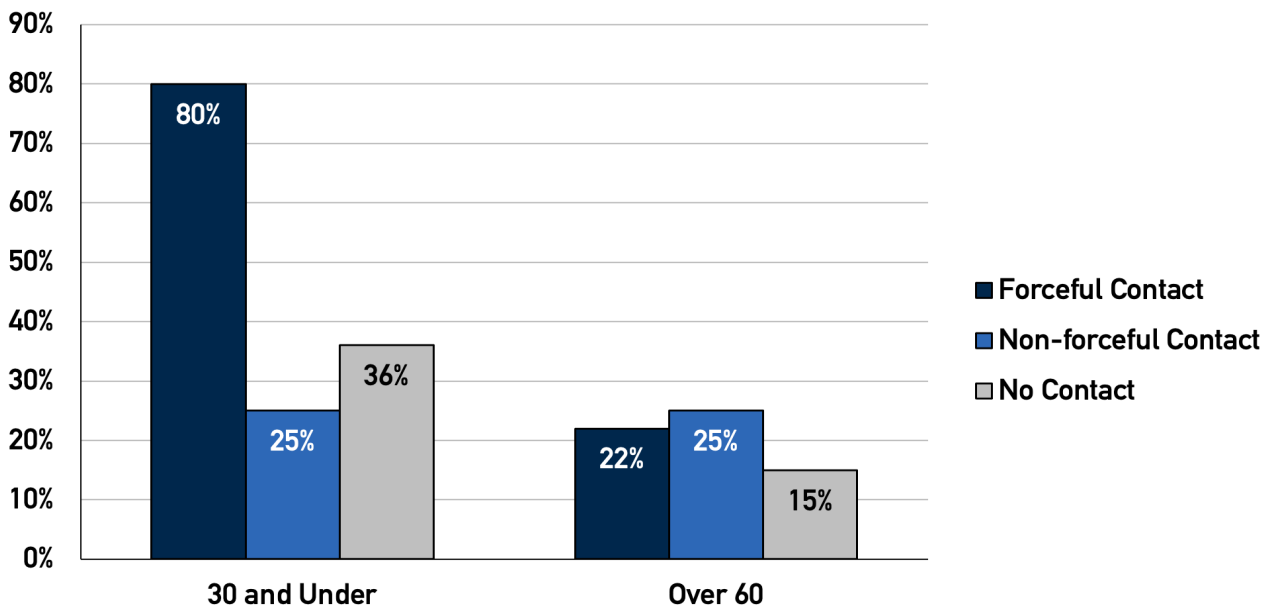
**Fig 1. Percent of Detroiters who report experiencing each type of police contact in 2020 (personal and proximate contact combined)**



# DETROITERS WHO EXPERIENCE FORCEFUL POLICE CONTACT ARE LESS LIKELY TO THINK THE POLICE ARE DOING A GOOD JOB IN COMPARISON TO DETROITERS WHO EXPERIENCE NON-FORCEFUL CONTACT AND NO CONTACT.

- Detroit residents who experience forceful contact are less likely to think their local police are doing a good job.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-six percent of those with forceful contact disagree that police are doing a good job protecting them and their neighborhood versus 33% of those with non-forceful contact and 22% of those with no police contact.
  - Younger Detroiters (ages 18-30) who report personal or proximate forceful contact are more than three times as likely to disagree that the police are doing a good job in comparison to those over 60 who experienced forceful contact (80% compared to 22%). This difference holds when accounting for other demographic factors such as race and gender.
  - Younger individuals are more critical of the police in general, as younger Detroit residents with no contact are also more likely to disagree that the police are doing a good job in comparison to older residents with no contact (36% compared to 15%).
  - While young Detroiters are more critical than older Detroiters across all contact categories, there are differences among young Detroiters in different contact categories. Young Detroiters with forceful contact are more than twice as likely to disagree that the police are doing a good job in comparison to young Detroiters with no contact (80% compared to 36%).
- Black Detroiters are more likely to disagree that the police are doing a good job protecting them and their local neighborhoods in comparison to White Detroiters, regardless of police contact (35% vs 21%).

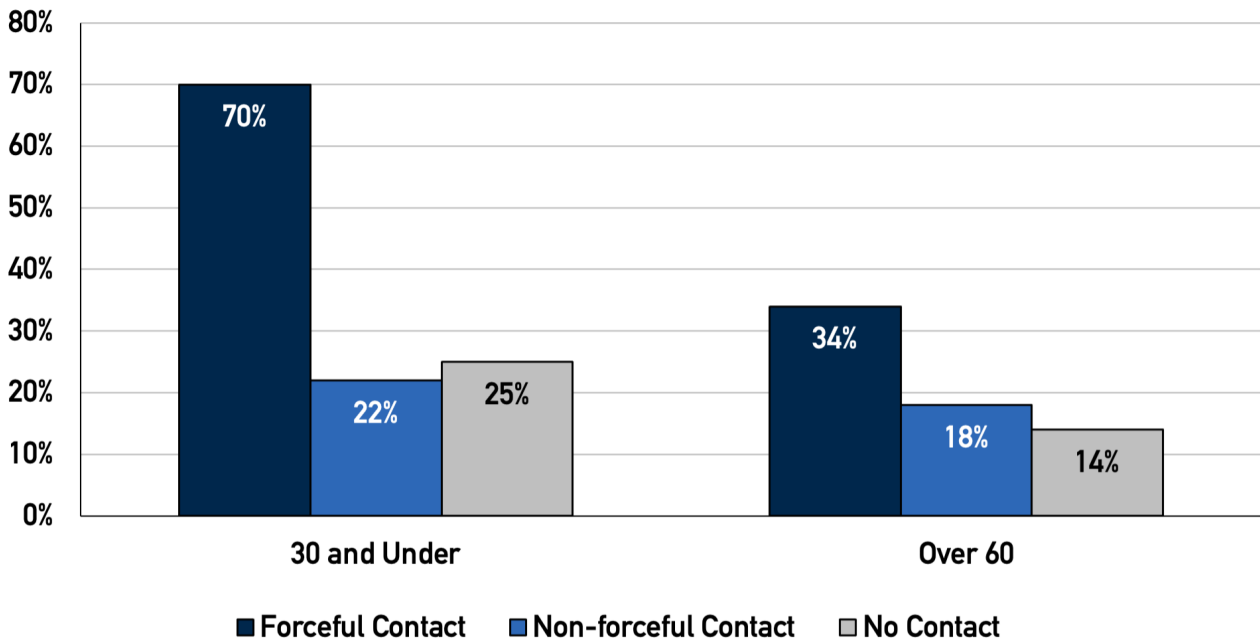
**Fig 2. Percentage of Detroiters who disagree that the police are doing a good job by age and police contact (2020)**



# DETROITERS WHO EXPERIENCE FORCEFUL CONTACT ARE LESS LIKELY TO THINK POLICE CAN BE TRUSTED THAN THOSE WITH NON-FORCEFUL CONTACT AND NO POLICE CONTACT.

- Detroit residents who experience forceful contact are more likely to disagree with the statement “the police in my neighborhood can be trusted” in comparison to other residents. Fifty percent of those with forceful contact disagree that police can be trusted in comparison to 27% of those with non-forceful contact and 19% of those with no contact.<sup>7</sup>
- Younger Detroit residents (between 18 and 30) with forceful contact are more than twice as likely to disagree that the police can be trusted in comparison to older residents (over 60) with forceful contact (70% compared to 34%).
- Younger individuals with no police contact are also more likely to disagree that the police can be trusted in comparison to older individuals with no contact. Twenty-five percent of younger individuals with no contact with police expressed distrust in the police, compared to 14% of older individuals with no police contact.
- Younger residents with forceful police contact are about three times as likely to express distrust in the police in comparison to younger residents with no police contact (70% vs 25%).

**Fig 3. Percent of Detroiters who do not think the police can be trusted by age and police contact (2020)**



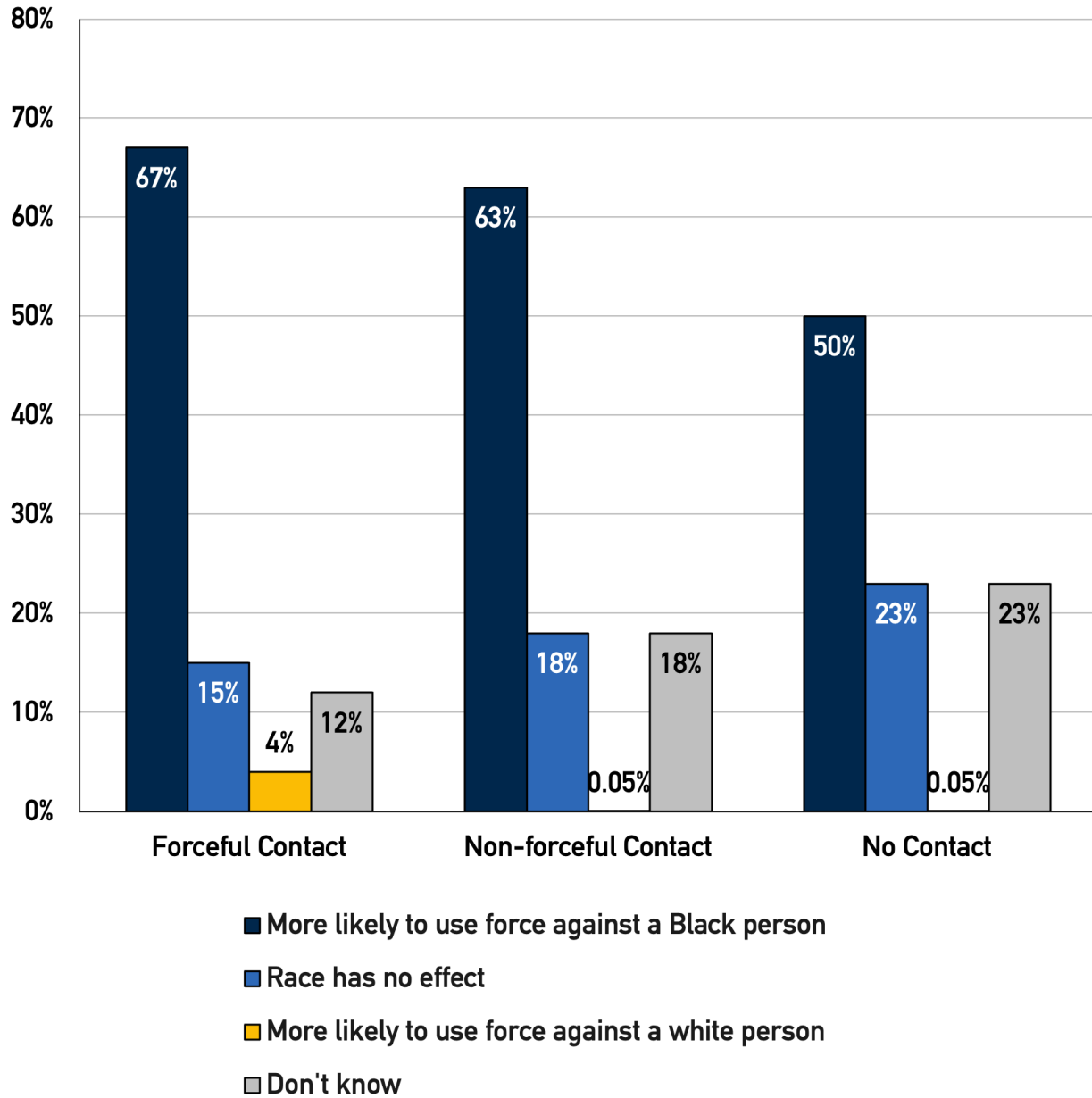
## DETROIT RESIDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE FORCEFUL CONTACT THINK POLICE ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE DEADLY FORCE AGAINST BLACK PEOPLE.

- Sixty-seven percent of Detroit residents with forceful contact think police are more likely to use deadly force against Black people than White people in comparison to those with no police contact (51%).<sup>8</sup>
  - Detroit residents who have experienced non-forceful contact also think that police are more likely to use deadly force against Black people than those with no police contact (63% vs 51%).
- When controlling for demographic factors, more Black residents than White residents across all contact categories believe that police are more likely to use deadly force against Black people.

## DETROIT RESIDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE FORCEFUL POLICE CONTACT THINK THE POLICE KILLINGS OF BLACK AMERICANS REFLECT A BROADER PATTERN OF HOW POLICE TREAT BLACK AMERICANS MORE THAN RESIDENTS WITHOUT POLICE CONTACT.

- Detroit residents who have experienced forceful police contact are more likely than residents with no police contact to think that police killings of Black Americans reflect a broader pattern of how police treat Black Americans.<sup>9</sup> Seventy-three percent of forceful contact residents think police killings reflect a broader pattern, in comparison to 54% of no police contact residents.<sup>10</sup>
- Detroit residents with non-forceful contact are also more likely to think that police killings of Black Americans reflect a broader pattern in comparison to residents with no police contact (67% vs 54%).
- Detroit residents with no police contact are five times more likely to believe that the killings of Black people are isolated incidents (meaning race plays no role) in comparison to residents with forceful contact (10% and 2% respectively).

**Fig 4. Detroiters' views towards the likelihood of police using deadly force by police contact**



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Respondents were asked: "Which of the following things have happened to you, another member of your family, or someone you know in the past 12 months?: Having contact with the police."
- 2 People can have contact with the police for a variety of reasons, including calling the police themselves because they are a victim of a violent crime. In this sample 8% of Detroiters who had any type of contact with the police report being the victim of a violent crime, so it is possible that these residents may have called the police themselves.
- 3 Respondents were asked "Which of the following things have happened to you, another member of your family, or someone you know in the past 12 months? Having excessive force used against someone by the police."
- 4 All analyses reported utilize weights to reflect the population of Detroit.
- 5 This number was calculated using the adult population (18 and up) of the city of Detroit according to the 2020 census and multiplying that number by .02. In our survey, forceful contact is not defined and thus this may overestimate the number of reports of forceful contact.
- 6 Respondents were asked if they "Strongly Disagree", "Somewhat disagree" "Neither agree nor disagree", "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement: "I think the local police are doing a good job of protecting me and my neighborhood." Respondents are considered to disagree with the statement if they answer "Strongly disagree" or "Somewhat disagree."
- 7 Respondents were asked if they "Strongly Disagree", "Somewhat disagree" "Neither agree nor disagree", "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement: "The police in my neighborhood can be trusted". Respondents are considered to disagree with the statement if they answer "Strongly disagree" or "Somewhat disagree."
- 8 Respondents were asked: " In general, do you think the police in and around Detroit are more likely to use deadly force against a Black person, or are more likely to use it against a white person, or do you think race does not affect police use of deadly force?" Respondents were given the response options: "More likely to use deadly force against a Black person", "More likely to use deadly force against a white person", "Race does not affect the use of deadly force" and "Don't know."
- 9 Respondents were asked "Do you think recent killings of African Americans by police are isolated incidents or are they part of a broader pattern of how police treat African Americans?" and could choose between "Isolated Incidents", "Part of a broader pattern" and "Don't know" as response options.
- 10 Both weighted t-tests and multivariate regressions that control for demographic factors show that forceful contact is a significant predictor of the likelihood of stating that police killings of Black Americans reflects a broader pattern of how police treat African Americans.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the generous support of the Knight Foundation, The Ballmer Group, the Michigan CEAL: Communities Conquering COVID (MICEAL) program (NIH grant 1 OT2 HL 156812), and Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan. This report was written by Lauren Chojnacki, a Research Associate at the Detroit Metro Areas Community Study, and is a collaborative effort of numerous colleagues.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

---

For more information on DMACS, please contact  
Sharon Sand, DMACS project manager, at  
[slsand@umich.edu](mailto:slsand@umich.edu).

**Learn more at [www.detroiturvey.umich.edu](http://www.detroiturvey.umich.edu)**

---

Support for DMACS comes from the University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, Institute for Social Research and Poverty Solutions. DMACS is also supported by the Knight Foundation.